

# **A STUDY OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT ARTS ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM**

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# **A STUDY OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AT ARTS ADMINISTRATION PROGRAM**

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## **DEDICATIONS**

Dedicated to all the people who have supported me throughout my education, and all the amazing interviewees who opened their hearts and minds to work with me with my thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

With its burgeoning economic development, China incubates an eager appreciation for art, which sending numbers of Chinese students to study in USA each year. The majority of Arts Administration programs in USA are tailored to the non-profits sector thanks to the well-nurtured social philanthropy culture, which is still at an early stage in China. Students who study abroad not only face the language barrier, cultural assimilation and academic shock, but also are challenged by the transition of adjusting to a different mentality of managing art.

My research focused on Chinese international students who want to pursue a master degree of Arts Administration in the USA. Using interviews and follow-up emails, I try to depict the picture of a group of characters, each of whom holds an unique approach while emerging into a generalized typical image. Through addressing their academic and social life, as well as career development, I intend to initiate progress that can be made to improve their experience of studying abroad. The research was complemented by perspectives from the other side – American faculty members, a group of people who are heavily involved with Chinese international students. Interviews with them provide a reverse version of the same subject matter, and this mirror effect brings a more objective view and also inspires everyone around the table to think differently about the situation of Chinese international students.

Briefly, my thesis verified findings in the existing literature, in which language barrier, difficulty in assimilation to a new culture and struggle with academic shock were specifically discussed. But interviewees also broaden my research by presenting critical

career-anxiety situations dealt by Chinese students, and professors' participation into the job-matching process shed light on the need of formal career training sessions initiated by the university.



## INTRODUCTION

According to the Open Doors annual report (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2014), there are 886,052 international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities, and 31% of them are from China. The number of Chinese students on U.S. campus has increased five times over since 2000, which demonstrates the fact that China is the top country of sending international students to the U.S. IIE's President, Dr. Allan E. Goodman pointed out that international experience is one of the most important components of a 21st century education, and study abroad should be regarded as an essential element of a college degree (Institute of International Education, 2014). In 2013, international students' spending in all 50 states contributed more than \$27 billion to the U.S. economy, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce (Institute of International Education, 2014). Apart from the financial contributions to universities' development, international students' distinct demand for courses like mathematics and engineering helps domestic students to have access to a more diversified range of subjects (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010).

Chinese international students choose to study abroad for many reasons, and Du and Wei (2015) agree with Yoon Lee, & Goth (2008) that experiencing differences to promote one's independence and cultivate one's ability to adapt to new cultures and environments are the essential motivations that drive Chinese international students to fly across the sea to the U.S. Education, skills, and conventions of the West are widely acknowledged by international students as value norms that they are willing to adopt (Rivzi, 2011).

However, a University's emphasis on the international students having to "adapt" or

“adjust” may effectively involve placing all the responsibility for change on the international student, and none on the University (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study is to investigate the condition of Chinese international graduate students' socialization, academic and employment performance in the masters program in Arts Administration in USA. Sociocultural adjustment, language competency, communication with the residents of the new country, and strategies for getting used to the new environment are all challenging for international students aiming to fulfill their “American Dream” in the U.S. (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). My research aims to address the needs of international students by identifying where progress can be made to improve the performance of Chinese international students. In order to attain the goal, I chose qualitative methods to carry out my research, for they can reveal the participants’ perspectives in a human way.

### **Research Questions**

My study intends to explore Chinese international students' academic, social and employment performance:

1. How is Chinese international students’ academic life going? How do they engage with professors, domestic students, as well as students who share the same background? Are there any challenges?
2. What are Chinese international students’ social experiences? In terms of the sociocultural adjustment they encounter, how do they get used to it?

3. What are the challenges Chinese international students are faced with? Do they have any strategies for success?

### **Limitations of the Study**

My participants are Chinese international students, who are pursuing the masters degree in Arts Administration in the USA, and faculty members the Arts Administration throughout the country as well. This study does not include comparisons between international students from diverse backgrounds, such as nationalities, cultures, religions as well as ethnicities. And it only covers the issues of the graduate level.

Since the research is intended to archive personal experiences, using narrative analysis of my view to reflect typical individuals' stories, the study is not representative of all the Chinese international students in U.S. Therefore, the conclusions of my research cannot be applied to the whole population of international students, even though there are some commonalities among the group.

### **Literature Review**

Research demonstrates that there are three major types of challenges faced by international students: the language barrier, adjustment to a new culture, and “academic culture shock.” The following section discusses each in more detail. The existing literature has explored the myth of international students, and the data were gathered through interviews and surveys.

## The Language Barrier

After reviewing the current literature, one of the challenges faced by Chinese international students at U.S. colleges and universities is the language barrier, which not only hampers Chinese international students from demanding more from academic life but also diminishes the confidence of acculturation. Nguyen (2013) interviewed six faculty advisors about experiences with international graduate students, and found out that all six advisors mentioned the language barrier as the biggest problem for these students. Language is the tool for expressing one's ideas and feelings, which is vital when adapting to a new environment. However, as Nguyen (2013) mentioned, that language difficulty can create a lack of confidence for international graduate students. One of her interviewees noted that Asian female international graduate students might be proficient in English, but yet they are "not confident."

A study conducted by Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010) describes international students as a vulnerable student population, pointing out that international students emphasized spoken language barriers far more than written language problems. Difficulties of understanding and speaking English were reported as a consistent stressor during the acculturative process of international students, and obtaining a better mastery of English is a primary goal (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser & Kumar, 2014). Lacking competency in the English language hampers Chinese international students from expressing themselves freely and confidently when working with domestic students and participating in class. Being quiet is the most common trait listed by American students and professors to describe Chinese international students (Ruble & Zhang, 2012). A Chinese female student interviewed by Aydinol (2013) indicated that she worked very hard but pretended

like she was not in order to gain respect and trust from her U.S. peers when being assigned to group projects, which confirms other studies showing that English language proficiency is vital to the success of international students (Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

Apart from academic pressure, language proficiency can also affect international students' mental health. Nguyen's study agreed with Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahame (2008) that international students with lower levels of English proficiency reported higher levels of depression and anxiety. Moreover, she found that difficulties with English led to discrimination on campus, in the form of U.S. students not wanting to work or interact with international students (Nguyen, 2013). One of Nguyen's interviewees even showed hostility about interacting with U.S. students by revealing their reluctance to socialize with domestic students with the justification that he already has the companionship of Chinese peers (Nguyen, 2013). Therefore, Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010) concluded that there should be a more formalized process of social interaction between international students and U.S. students which would help the former to acquire English language skills, including knowledge of slang, in a more relaxed environment in and beyond classes. In addition, Aydinol (2013) and her participant also mentioned that the host college or university should initiate more workshops or seminars to help international students improve their English.

### **Adjustment to A New Culture**

Ingrained with the Confucian history and collective culture, many Chinese international students find the enthusiasm of individuality embraced by U.S. culture shocking to them.

Du and Wei (2015), along with Berry (1997) and Kim (2006), explain the process of adjusting to a new culture as acculturation, which they further define as cultural socialization to the mainstream society. When Chinese international students come to the U.S. they encounter not only academic challenges, every single thing in daily life can be exhausting, such as finding food, housing and transportation. As Aydinol (2013) suggests, international students may experience food shock, as they are likely to be unfamiliar with the local food in the new country. Food plays an important role in acculturation because, as Brown and Aktas (2001) mention, food is related to the well being of individuals and their cultural identity.

The process of adjustment is challenging, and culture shock is the first and foremost struggle international students face. Oberg (1960) defined culture shock as an “occupational disease” that causes anxiety due to the foreign ways of manners and expressions, which are different from the cultural signs learned in the previous environment. In China, Confucianism values modesty, relationships, and collectivism; Taoism values harmony with reality (Wang, Heppner, Fu, Zhao, Li & Chuang). Students from China are often brought up in a traditionally collectivistic culture (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser & Kumar, 2014). For example, in Chinese culture, being “quiet” is considered to be a good trait for people, but in the context of the U.S., where people value outgoing personalities a lot, quietness can be viewed as a negative trait. As Tavakoli et al. (2009) note, a person’s cultural background also dictates the type of communication he or she is comfortable with. When Chinese international students come to a new environment, they lose the familiar cultural signs that used to guide them, such as when to raise questions appropriately in class (Aydinol 2013). Assertive

communication may be in direct conflict with some of the values ingrained in international students' mindsets, and this may cause a cultural conflict (Tavakoli et al., 2009).

Telbis, Helgeson and Kingsbury (2014) indicate that individualism and collectivism are used as the focus point in cross-cultural psychology to explain cultural differences and could be regarded as significant obstacles when it comes to a person's ease of acculturation or assimilation. Yeh and Inose's (2003) study suggests that Chinese international students in the U.S. tend to experience high levels of adjustment difficulties, most likely because of the vast differences in social and cultural norms. These cultural differences prevent Chinese international students from obtaining friendships with American students, because, as one interviewee found out that it's difficult to find common topics to talk with others. (Sherry, Thomas and Chui, 2010).

Further complicating this challenge is an acculturated reluctance to acknowledge it directly. In Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, and Bedan's (2005) study, they found that many Asian international students tend to present with physical complaints rather than emotional problems, given that psychological difficulties are often linked with shame and selfishness in Chinese culture (Zhang & Dixon, 2003). When encountering stress, Chinese international students internalize this stress, and it may result in an increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, or psychosomatic presentations (Wei et al., 2007).

However, as Du & Wei (2015) point out, almost all of the existing studies used cross-sectional designs, which failed to reveal the adjustment process (J. Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Moreover, most studies focus on the negative psychological problems, such as

acculturative stress, and psychological distress, which suggests that the acculturative process is a stressful event rather than a new and inspiring learning experience (Yoon, Lee, & Goh, 2008). The result is that these studies taken together present Chinese international students as a group of vulnerable and pathetic people, who are waiting for saving and sympathy. Human beings are individuals, who have commonalities but also are different in many ways. In terms of acculturation, Berry (1997) came up with a theory, in which he categorized international students into four groups: well-adjusted, culture-shocked, consistently distressed, and relieved. The well-adjusted group was characterized as students with high self-esteem, who have the lowest tendency of being perfect, and the highest problem-solving inclination.

### **“Academic Culture Shock”**

“Academic culture shock” haunts some Chinese international students who come to the U.S to study. Li, Chen and Duanmu’s study mentions “academic culture shock” as another challenge facing international students (2010). As Gilbert (2000, p36) defines it, academic culture shock is a subset of culture shock, and, “is a case of incongruent schemata about higher education in the students’ home country and in the host country.” Chinese international students face this type of culture shock in many ways, such as different styles of class participation, a lack of understanding of what professors expect from them, an inability to engage in the community, and difficulties of working with home students.

Aydinol (2013) mentioned that as Chinese international students come to the U.S. to chase after their American Dreams, they usually have anxieties of meeting the academic



expectations, which may cause depression and self-doubt. Help from professors and American students can be critical in combating this, however, as mentioned before, asking for help is a stigma in Chinese culture. It is also considered humiliating to turn to counseling for help. For example, international students may think that getting help from counseling services is culturally inappropriate and so may resist seeking help because of their negative perceptions (Chen, & Lewis, 2011). Chinese international students are observed as being inactive in the classroom and they tend to be less keen to participate in group discussions or debate in class and do not like to raise their hands or answer questions (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Nguyen (2013) affirms the issue with her findings that advisors are unanimous in reporting that international students are very silent regarding their needs in the classroom. In terms of pushing Chinese international students to change their mindset immediately, Nguyen (2013) explained that since international students' studying habits and patterns are ingrained, it could be difficult for them to break away from these habits and patterns. Telbis, Helgeson, and Kingsbury (2014) provide one example of the differences in U.S. and Chinese international students' academic habits by revealing that Asian students typically combine the process of memorizing and understanding in ways not commonly found among Western students (Watkins, 1996). They suggest that U.S. university advisors must be made aware of all styles of international approaches to education because the students' success is determined by the nature of the curriculum as well as the environment where the studies take place (Kember & Gow, 1991).

Nguyen (2013) supports the former conclusion by further exploring the perspectives of the advisors she interviewed. She found that they regard being patient in different

aspects such as communication style, instructional style, and adjustment rate as the most important lesson when dealing with Chinese international students. Having open communication and conversation with advisors can help lessen an international student's homesickness or other distress (Nguyen, 2013).

## Methodology

My research extends the existing literature by providing up-to-date information gathered through my interviews. However, the existing research mostly focuses on the perspectives of Chinese international students and faculties and is lack of a constructive two-way conversation, so that both sides would find the possibility of Chinese international students' survival is like walking in a tunnel, where no sliver of light is to be found.

I intend to enrich the existing literature by bringing different angles, not only from Chinese international students, but also from university faculty. Instead of exhibiting the complaints and frustrations, I am more interested in digging out the consensus, with which progress can be made; presenting the misunderstandings, based on which alternatives can be provided; and the most important thing, injecting the spring of faith, for everyone deserves a chance of pursuing the high-quality education, which will influence everyone throughout their lives.

## Research Paradigm

I am applying a qualitative research method to my study to obtain an insight of Chinese international students' experiences in Drexel University's arts administration program and beyond.

I conducted in-depth interviews to gather data. My interviews were designed to be open-ended and semi-structured so that my interviewees will not be restricted in their answers, and will be able to share their personal thoughts and feelings.

## Participants

The participants of my study were Chinese graduate students, some of whom were current students, while some have graduated. The diversity of interviewees who were in different periods of their study and life revealed a more well-rounded perspective to me. Then I interviewed professors who have engaged with Chinese international students, to jump out of the internal zone and relate to the external environment.

## Interviews

All interviews will be conducted in person, and will be recorded for the purposes coding and analysis only. Anonymity will be guaranteed to all participants. Every face-to-face interview will last from 30 minutes to 45 minutes and during the interviews I will take notes.

In terms of Chinese international students, every participant reported background and basic information, such as age, gender, the status (graduated or expected to graduate;

employed or unemployed), and the reason why they chose to study at Arts Administration program.

In terms of faculties, fixed questions are listed:

1. Would you please list 3 traits that you find most Chinese students in common?
2. Is there anything you find in Chinese students that make them distinguish themselves no matter they are aware of that or not?
3. What do you expect from Chinese students from the point of a professor's view?
4. What challenges you most when dealing with Chinese students?

Through this research, I expect to find the positive possibility of the rise of Chinese international students. Within the context of cultural assimilation, taking advantage of the difference is always understated. So I aim to assist with Chinese international students to reposition themselves by utilizing their potentials and making unique contributions to USA. Also, my results would shed light on opportunities for U.S. universities to do a better job in helping international students acculturate and succeed in their study abroad.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTERVIEWS WITH CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

I interviewed seven international students within and beyond Drexel University, who pursued or are pursuing an Arts Administration graduate degree in USA. They were picked with the purpose of diversification ranging from ages, genders and regions. The interviewees have shared the general mentality of studying abroad, yet are varied from personal expectations as well as experiences. Some of the findings fall into the existing literature, while some of them are beyond. The language barrier, as the existing literature has pointed out, plays a fundamental role in hindering Chinese students from adapting well into American life, both academic and social. Different cultural norms, such as options of dealing with frustrations, also alienate Chinese students from jumping out of Asian Bubble and involving themselves into local community. Academic shock exists, as the existing literature has stated, the phenomenon that Chinese students being reluctant to become vocal during discussion at classes is invalidated by interviewees sharing how frustrated and terrified they are when speaking publicly.

Apart from the findings above, interviewees also revealed other concerns – feeling disconnected from the working sphere and scarce opportunities tailored to them. The stories have demonstrated different angles towards the same subject matter of how international students experience their life at the Arts Administration program in USA. However, different individuals possess diverse dispositions, resulting in personal approaches to various situations.

## Wenlong Yu

Yu graduated from the Arts Administration program at Drexel University in 2014, and now he is pursuing a certificate of Computer Science at New York Institute of Technology. He lives in the borough of Queens in New York with his girlfriend who studies Finance. Based on our latest contact in December 2015, Yu is still unemployed and hunting for a job.

Wenlong Yu applied for the Arts Administration program with the experience of interning at Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, one of the most distinguished arts organizations in China. During his study at Drexel, Yu poured his heart into every aspect of his graduate life. He interned at Philadelphia Art Alliance and Fringe Arts, two local non-profit organizations in Philadelphia, volunteered for AIGA Philadelphia and worked as the First Year Liaison and International Student Mentor for AAGA at Drexel. So no wonder he described his graduate life as “very rewarding and almost utilized every resource he can get.”

Before he started his degree, he didn’t know the program is rooted in a non-profit mindset, which is still in its rudimentary stage in China, and “China and USA have totally different understanding of arts administration, me and my peers thought the program would prepare us to be a curator after graduation, but now I know you need to have art history degree to do that.” Even though the reality shocked Yu hard, he managed to adjust his strategy and started to leverage his background in order to find his niche.

“The faculty is not very helpful in terms of finding tailored job opportunities for international students. But it’s understandable because Philadelphia is very provincial and

they don't need people with my background as much as metropolitan cities like New York. But I kept an eye on Job Bank and applied for jobs all by myself." At the Philadelphia Art Alliance, he participated in a special exhibition of a Chinese artist Song Dong. In Fringe Arts, he interned as an accountant in the marketing and development department. "But these organizations are small and poor, they don't have the intention to hire a paid employee, especially an international one, so I decided to go to New York for more opportunities."

After graduation, Yu went to New York and worked at the Museum of Modern Art in visitor services for 6 months. Up to our interview in the summer of 2015, Yu's student visa was at the brink of validity, and he's anxious about finding another job. "You know, what's worst about being an international student is, your time in USA is clicking behind your neck, you have to compete with both people and time. Very stressful." In order to prolong his legal stay in USA, Yu, along with many other Chinese international students, has registered at an institute, "I am applying for a certificate, which is cheaper compared to another master degree," as Yu said, "then during the certificate period, I can continue looking for jobs." The reason that Yu wanted to study Computer Science is, "My graduate study focused too much on theoretical management, but the entry level jobs in real world demand more practical skills, such as building websites, navigating Adobe [software] as well as maintaining social media platforms." Furthermore, Yu felt that the education he received at Drexel suffered from a lack of diversity, "I really wish Drexel can provide more courses related to for-profit arts sector, such as galleries and auctions, so when we are applying for jobs, we can have more choices." Yu pointed out a brutal

reality every international student needs to face - the job has to be directly related to the degree, which limits the job-hunting pool to a small scale, as competitive as hell.

Wenlong Yu is a distinguished and outstanding student for sure, if taking how engaged he was into consideration. Also, he tried his best to assimilate into American circles and pushed himself to jump out of his comfort zone. He hung out with local students sharing same interests in rock and roll music with him a lot, going out for concerts and hosting themed parties quite often during his leisure time. “I really had a great social life in Philadelphia with my classmates and friends, and I liked American culture very much because it speaks to me most.”

So far, Yu is still interning without payment at small galleries in New York and struggling very hard to finally settle down for a real job.

### **Junzi Yuan**

Junzi Yuan, who used to be a graduate student of Interior Design at Drexel, transferred to the Arts Administration program in 2015. Now she is preparing her thesis to graduate in March 2016.

“I want to score 6-7 out of 10 for this program so far,” Yuan said with excitement, “When I was in the Interior Design program, the study method was very different, we didn't learn so many theories, most of the time, we put our hands on creation. After I transferred my major to Arts Administration, my mindset has reshaped. Because this program has a totally different philosophy.” Yuan felt the new program had opened her mind in various ways, she was taught how to apply theories to practices, think like a



leader in an organization, map big pictures, and envision the future. “All of this opens my horizon, which used to be narrowed when I locked myself in the lab.”

Junzi Yuan didn’t have any working experience before she applied for this program, so when her classmates shared practical experiences at class, she always felt lost and disconnected. “I struggled a lot during classes, because as an artist before, my English is not as strong as my peers, even though I am a talkative person, I feel ashamed to talk in public because I am afraid of being laughed at.” Apart from the language barrier, Yuan found that some professors spent too much time on topics that were only interesting to local students, making her feel like her productive time was wasted. The information asymmetry has created huge gap between international students and local hosts. “So I was wondering if the program would partner with arts institution for us to get field experiences,” as Yuan said, “Philly is a very provincial city, sometimes it’s so hard for international students to break the ice by ourselves,” so she expected the program to function as a bridge between the working sphere and the school.

Apart from the study, Yuan also has an eager to know the culture better. However, events hosted by the university are more or less irrelevant in terms of engaging Chinese international students. “Please organize more events beyond classes to let classmates know each other,” Yuan is not satisfied that she is been trapped in the Asian Bubble, even if she tried to make a breakthrough, she needs more external support to smooth the awkwardness. When encountering difficulties in life, Yuan intends to reach out to other Chinese peers for emotional support instead of consulting the faculty or the International Student and Scholar Services. “Because I don’t think they can really put their feet into our shoes, because they don’t relate to us at the way we expected.” Yuan was disgruntled

when revealing her attitudes and thoughts on how to deal with frustrations. “I don’t understand why there are no Chinese consultants at the school when they are recruiting more and more Chinese international students year by year.”

Up to now, Yuan hasn’t interned in any organizations, and she is still trying to figure out what she wants to do after graduation. Right now, she shows no interest in working in the non-profit sector, for she think the salary is too low and the staff are underpaid. Be realistic: non-profit job opportunities are rare in China. At the final of the interview, Yuan said that she may go back to her formal track – to become a designer. “I left designing to explore my other interests and potentials, but that just make me realize how much I love designing and how suitable designing is for me. Sometimes it's ok to walk out of the track and think in anther way, but finally I feel like I want to become a designer.”

As a typical girl of the post-90s generation from China, Yuan is the only child of her parents. So she enjoys all the resources and attentions from her family and she could be able to get the financial support as much as she wants. “My parents are super supportive and they don’t want me to consider making my own bread now, so I still have time to figure out what I exactly wan to do after graduating.”

## Meili Ni

Meili Ni, Graduated from the Master of Fine Arts in Arts Leadership program at Seattle University in 2015. Now she works at Seattle Symphony as a full-time staff.

Ni was highly recommended by her professor, who promised to me that Ni's experiences would be a good example of how Chinese international students succeed in USA, and it turned out that Ni was as inspiring as promised.

She described herself as self-motivated, passionate, and intelligent, and she accepted the fact that her English was her weakness then seized every opportunity to improve it. "I pushed myself to at least speak once at a class, and I told myself that group discussion was not seen as public speaking," she said that's the requirement she set for herself even though it's not written on any syllabuses. After diligent practice, she not only became more outspoken in classes, but also showcased her intelligence and talents in front of professors and colleagues, who gradually returned respect and recognition to her participation. "I was horrible at speaking publicly, and I am still very awkward today, but I made progress, and I didn't break the promise with myself, whom I never let down. The sense of being committed to myself gives me confidence." As a determined student, Ni utilized each way of communication in English, and she set up regular appointments with her professors, normally talking about schoolwork, papers or her internship, and she also revealed her secrets to students who were too shy to speak publicly, "You can communicate with professors and classmates through emails, or you can join their happy hour session after class. Just do something instead of complaining."

As a whole, Ni's quite satisfied with her experience with the program. When she encountered difficulties and frustrations, she wasn't hesitant to reach out to the faculty for help. In her mentality, making suggestions would benefit not only her but also the whole program, because, "I was never afraid that others would judge me as picky or mean to make suggestions, if you internalize your frustrations instead of making constructive

advise, things would never change.” Ni advocated every international Chinese student to self-start conversations with professors, whom they can work with to plan a path on how to reach their goals in two years. With the help of her supervisor, Ni embellished her first resume and cover letter, and received tips on interview skills too.

Apart from academic life, Ni involved herself into a handful of social activities, taking advantage of resources at or beyond school, such as career fair, workshops, cultural event, etc. Since she has been enthusiastic about snowboarding, she went to the weekly snowboard trips organized by the school and made bunch of friends with local students who enjoyed snowboarding as well. In terms of to stay or not to stay in the Asian Bubble, Ni said, “I don’t specifically hangout with Chinese peers or native students, and I think it’s silly to categorize friends by nationality, you are creating boundaries for yourself though.” She made friends based on common interests or shared values.

“Be brave and open to yourself,” is Ni’s mantra. Even an audacious girl like her has regrets and disappointments, and again, she’s not afraid to reveal her vulnerability, “One thing I didn’t realize until recent is, when international students come to the workforce, because they need H1B, or even just a host organization for their OPT, they tend to lower themselves and do whatever as told, as long as the employer is willing to provide such for them.” After two years’ of independent life in USA, Meili Ni realized that the best result of studying abroad is, after crawling alone in the tunnel with endless darkness ahead, you finally see the light at the end, where you found a better version of yourself, who may surprise you in an unexpected way.

**A (anonymous under requested)**

A has been notoriously dissatisfied with the Arts Administration program since start. After receiving her undergraduate degree in China, A was pushed by her parents to pursue a master degree in USA. She flew to the host city without the understanding that the program, like any other Arts Administration programs in the United States, was non-profit oriented, meaning her expectation of working in a for-profit movie company would be crushed by the reality. And she was crushed indeed.

“I wanted to drop out at the first class when everyone was talking about their past experiences, because I felt disconnected and distant. And it’s painful for me to picture my future in this program.” She said honestly. However, under pressure of her parents, A decided to stay in this program until she completed all the credits and got the degree.

“I tried, I did try to fit in this program,” A said, at the first quarter, she volunteered for a small non-profit organization related to theatre, and the experience deteriorated her faith in this arena for many reasons; First, A used to work fulltime for a media company in China, which was demanding but fulfilling, and A enjoyed this kind of fast-paced working environment so much that she could not put up with the slow and inefficient day-to-day functionality of the theatre. Second, A found it hard to relate herself to American culture, since all of her knowledge and philosophy ranging from every aspect in life are grounded in Chinese. She can hardly continue conversations with local native speakers. Finally, A was an introvert who preferred deep and close relationships instead of networking among strangers. Both the external and internal difficulties A was encountering with defeated her enthusiasm about USA, and she couldn’t help but end up in depression.

“I admire other Chinese peers who can push themselves jump out of their comfort zone and really find their niches. But I am a passive introvert, and I don’t want to change myself.” A’s persistence was quite understandable because everyone deserves to choose their own way. With the determination of graduating and flying back to China as soon as possible, A made her decision to stay distant from the program, she stopped interacting with classmates and professors not only at school but also in social. “I found myself an illegal job in the Chinese community, where I worked for a lawyer who’s dealing with immigrants’ cases. He paid me by cash and it’s way much better than volunteering for non-profits organizations.” She accepted the job with the intention of killing time and avoiding loneliness as well.

Up to our interview, A’s parents have set up a job position for A to take, once she lands in the airport of her hometown in March 2016, she can start to work, at least, “in a normal place.”

### **Focus Group: Xiao Sun, Qianru Yang, and Xiao Han**

Xiao Sun (XS), graduated from the Arts Administration program in 2015, now works in a consulting company unrelated to art, and lives in New York with his girlfriend.

Qianru Yang (QY), graduated from the Arts Administration program in 2015, now works as a sales associate at Tiffany & Co. She is married and lives in Philadelphia.

Xiao Han (XH), graduated from the Arts Administration program in 2015, went back to China after graduation and works as a dancer now.

Both Sun and Yang received their undergraduate degrees in USA.

**Question 1: What is your general impression of this program?**

For QY, in a word, it's a well-respected program with good word of mouth, not to mention how historical the location it. It's the destination for any student who wants to study art. However, it's not suitable for Chinese students. As an international student, she felt that she's insufficient in English, but the program demands not only strong communicating ability but also solid knowledge of art and the city. "We are not at the same starting line at first."

XS agrees with QY mostly, but he also points out, "I don't think we should blame on language barrier a lot. USA is the homeland for immigrants, who come to the country with the determination of learning English as their first language," To further justify his opinion, XS said, "Nobody should pity you for your poor English, once you decided to come to USA, you should be prepared to put 200% efforts into learning English until you catch up with the native speakers."

XH enjoyed the program very much and she underlined her content by saying, "I used to be a dancer and spoke poor English, but after nearly 2 years practice, now I am more confident in my English." Moreover, she learned to live by her own and established friendships with American colleagues in the organization she interned.

**Question 2: Describe the moment you feel most satisfied in this program.**

QY said, "I never had the feeling actually. Once I sensed that this program was just a trade of degree for me, I gave up trying and focused on looking for a job instead." QY holds an undergraduate degree on business, which enabled her to get into the financial world, where she worked in a bank as a part-time.

XS didn't have the feeling as well. After diligently diving into his memories, he confessed that he got a strong sense of achievement only when he handed in his 100-page-long thesis. "I love my undergraduate years more, because the curriculum graduate school provided was so limited and narrow, I didn't get much freedom to explore things that I really like." QY added, "Yes, and some of the courses were overlapped in terms of course objectives and reading materials. But it's set up as a required course, so we didn't even have a chance to drop. I wished I could enroll in some for-profit courses related to galleries and auctions."

Again, XH demonstrated a 180-degree angle towards this question. She can recall many things that make her feel proud, "The last quarter was tough, I was writing my thesis, attending classes and looking for a job." She happily told the story of giving an excellent presentation in city hall at the end of the quarter, "That night was the first time I experienced going through hardships and surviving from difficulties, I was about to drop a course, but finally I made it." Meanwhile, she expressed his regrets that she didn't come to USA to attend the undergraduate school, "If I were younger, I believe I can be more flexible and open-minded about learning and accepting new things." XH came to USA with the plan of returning to China after graduation so that she didn't have too much pressure in finding a long-term job.

**Question 3: Then tell me the moment you feel most frustrated.**

XS jumped on to this question, "I had lots of frustrated moments, among which the fact that there were only three full-time faculty in this program upset me most." However QY found part-time faculties were good, "They bring their practical experiences to class, then



we can have a balance between theory and practice,” she said. Meanwhile, XH, the former dancer, also spoke highly of adjunct professors, who offered chances for students to coordinate with real organizations and get hands-on experiences, “That is good preparation for our career,” she said.

When it turned to QY, she was lost for a while, after a deep breath, she told us a story with unfeigned melancholy. At the start of the program, she went to an interview with a start-up non-profit organization of four employees in music industry. With the help of Google Map, the taxi driver spent 20 minute to finally take her to the organization, which was located at a vacant loft in the suburbs. She overcame her fear of the bleakness, but failed to survive from the humiliation because, “It’s a perfunctory interview and the interviewer hadn’t prepared anything at all. I don’t think he appreciated my time and effort,” at the end, QR didn’t get the unpaid internship offer and had to face the feedback that she was not qualified.

XH resonated with QY’s story very much, as a buoyant girl who seemed to smile all the time, XH sighed for a while then started to tell her story, “The boss of my first job was a very irresponsible supervisor, he would stood me up without even bothering to text me.” She didn’t receive any mentorship or tutorial while working as a volunteer for the organization for half a year. QY added, “No matter how seriously our textbook advocates better treatment for volunteers, the real world is not on the same page actually.” XS made comments as well, “I think it depends on who your supervisor is. I interned at the National Museum of American Jewish History, my boss is a real bad ass, he is very hardworking and demanding, but also willing to teach interns valuable lessons and push

us to reach our limits, I have learned a lot under his leadership. But your frustration is very ubiquitous among non-profit sectors.”

**Question 4: How do you deal with your frustration while staying with this program?**

None of them tended to consult ISSS, as known as International Student and Scholar Service, and their reasons of “why not” validated the findings stated in the literature review; they see asking for professional consultancy of their mental health as a stigma, which would label them as weirdo or losers. Also, reaching out to faculty is a bad idea, for they don’t expect too much emotional support from professors except for specific academic help. Both of the two girls found starting a conversation with their close friends would be the best way to relief, while XS, as a typical Chinese male, would rather internalize his frustration until he put himself together.

“I don’t feel comfortable to talk about my issues with someone I don’t stay intimate with,” QY said, “Plus, ISSS would regard my issues as their must-do jobs, how can they really understand me?” XH agreed and added, “Yes, and none of the staffs at ISSS speak Chinese, however, sometimes I just want to talk to someone who shares the Chinese mentality with me.” Having a psychiatrist is not common in Chinese culture, only people who have serious mental health issues look for service like that, the degree of seriousness would be committing suicide.

Chinese Students and Scholars Association at Drexel University, established in March 2009, aims to provide support to all Chinese students and scholars who are adjusting to the new environment as well as to the college life. However, none of the three

interviewees have ever heard of that. Not to mention the latest event hosted by this organization was in 2011.

Both QY and XS experienced their undergraduate life in USA, but their attitudes towards assimilation into American culture were different. QY chose to stay in the Asian Bubble for she enjoyed sharing the same mentality within a Chinese-based community, “American culture doesn’t speak to me at all, and I am very comfy with Chinese groups,” she said unapologetically. Meanwhile, XS, who studied Art History for four years, laughed and said, “My class only had one Chinese, which was me! I had to get involved, but I have never been a main-stream boy throughout my life, I just love subculture and enjoy being a loner.” Last but not least, the former dancer, XH, who more or less found it very easy to find American friends, because she’s a sentimental and expressive person and, “Dancers communicate with body languages, even though my English is not very fluent, I have another channel to express myself and engage people, dancing releases me in an amazing way.” But when it comes to facing with difficulties and frustrations in life, the three interviewees chose to isolate themselves from American community and try to solve problems independently, because, “We don’t want them to look down on us.”

#### **Question 5: Anything else you want to put on the table?**

For QY, the program itself is fantastic indeed, but she’s afraid that if the college continues recruiting more and more Chinese students, while stays rigid and reluctant to make changes for them, the qualification and reputation of this program is at the risk of being jeopardized. “Arts Administration Graduate Association plays minimum role in involving international students, just take a look at people who sit at the meeting. We are

under represented.” XS shared the same concerns with QY, moreover, he added, “As a graduate program, there are too many people in the class, isn’t graduate study set as small-grouped?” The three interviewees strongly recommended the program to initiate more networking opportunities again, “Apart from Cultural Alliance, the serious networking chances are too rare, what amused me most is, the Cultural Alliance event happened at the start of the program, at that point of our life, how could they expect us to run before warming up and learning to walk first?” said XS. XH had a more positive feedback of her experience, but she decided to return to dancing industry after going back to China, “I don’t think the graduate program has prepared me to be more competitive in terms of being hired as a administrator, so I prefer dancing.”

## CHAPTER 2: INTERVIEWS WITH PROFESSORS

Five professors from Arts Administration graduate programs around the USA took part in the research. All of them answered both open-ended and closed-ended questions, the answers vary from person to person, yet still manage to generalize issues applied to the Chinese international students community. Under request, all of the interviewees are anonymous.

### General Academic Performance

When asked to describe Chinese international students in three adjective words, hard working, quiet and curious appeared most. Below are other words used by professors: polite, intelligent, goal-oriented, dedicated to academic, brave, determined, aggressive, distant, formal, and structured.

Generally, during the interviews, professor spoke highly of how hard working and diligent Chinese students are in terms of dedicating themselves to academic study, “they surprised me very much especially when I was reading their papers, they think critically,” said by one professor, more evidences were provided by another professor, for he mentioned that since English is not Chinese students’ first language and the program assigned huge amount of readings, his Chinese students managed to work very hard until finishing the weekly tasks, most of which would cost them more than twice time compared with local students. He said, “You can definitely see how determined and curious they are by finishing so much reading.”

However, the concern of Chinese students being quite at class and reluctant to participate were brought up by professors very often. And almost every professor pointed out one pattern among Chinese students, “I have to call on them to make them talk at class otherwise they choose to stay quiet.” Three professors strongly encouraged Chinese students to talk more at class, “Since the graduate study is discussion-based and all the courses require class participation, they should speak up more not only for earning credits but also for their improvement of self-expression,” according to one professor.

Even though Chinese students seem to be quite, some professors thought they were more curious than local students, “sometimes even more aggressive,” said by a professor who used to be challenged by his Chinese students.

Chinese students were praised as being polite, but maybe too “formal.” One professor showed disappointment about Chinese students only communicate with him through emails and never initiate conversations with him, “I don’t require students to come to my office and talk to me, even though I wish they could come more.”

### **Social Interaction Beyond Academic**

In terms of social interaction beyond academic life, professors are on the same page of citing that Chinese international students are not as willing as local students to socialize with the faculty. “Office Hour” functions as the only way they would talk to professors outside the classroom. But, “you have to request them to come, otherwise they hardly initiate any face-to-face meetings with me.” Not only one professor showed concerns of being lack of communication with Chinese students. “And I found out that they are more expressive at the private meetings than at class,” one professor said, “I am not sure if it’s

phenomenal, but if it's cultural norms that Chinese students tend to talk more personally, I would like to set up more meetings with them," he added, "I know as a faculty, I should do more." However, not every professor expressed willingness to push Chinese students hard by reasoning that, "Personally, I am eager to help every students, but if talking to me is not on their agenda, I feel it is inappropriate to initiate meetings unexpected by them, I want my students to go with the flow and choose their own approach." In terms of the content of "Office Hour", according to different professors, most students come to the meeting with one agenda item, such as paper they are working on, the schedule of the quarter, or confusion about the course, once they finish the agenda item, they leave without furthering the conversations, "I don't know so many details about their life, but local students would share lots of personal life with me, that makes me know them better," one professor said. Not so often will a Chinese student share personal life with a professor, "Probably it's because they don't share it in China either," said by one professor disappointedly.

Some professors confidently introduced their successful social interactions with Chinese international students, "I like to host graduation party at my house, and my Chinese students enjoyed very much, they still keep in touch with me now." And regularly organizing gallery hop or museum visit help smooth the awkwardness existing among classmates very much. Mover, inviting Chinese students to thanksgiving party also works out because, "I want to give them a sense of belonging, and a chance of exploring authentic American culture, my students loved it." Potluck gatherings are welcomed by Chinese students as well, "I ask them to bring their own Chinese food, as a way of introducing their own cultural identity, and who would say no to Chinese food?" said by

a professor who has been in arts administration sector for 20 years, embracing countless happy memories spent with Chinese students.

Language barrier is the number one reason provided with every professor when asked why Chinese students are reluctant to socialize more. One professor even doubted that his personality and reputation may hinder Chinese students to come to meet him, “But I am actually very flexible and encouraged, and I appreciate how brave Chinese students are because they are competing with local students with their second language.”

### Career Consultant

Every professor interviewed has experiences of introducing internships opportunities to Chinese students. They not only provide detailed instructions but also pour their heart into various assistance, such as making endorsement, rewriting cover letters, editing resumes, etc. “We as professors, of course want to see our students hit on the track of the career they want to have, and I am always happy to open doors for them.” This shared enthusiasm is celebrated among professors. Not only in general, each professor gave examples of one of their Chinese students who got what they want with their help. See Meili Ni as a perfect case study.

However, professors somehow feel pressured because, “I think the university itself should do more for international student such as setting up career fair or bringing mentors to give workshops. At the end of the day, as a professor, my primary responsibility is teaching, not job matching,” cited from a professor, who is diligent in every aspect of devoting himself to this program, yet still hopes more improvement can be made with the kindness of giving every Chinese student a unforgettable experience.



Unlike other professors, one professor was very upset with the fact that every Chinese student wants to get a real job after graduation. She mentioned, “I hope Chinese students can be more consistent with their application statement, because when they were interviewed by this program, they said they just wanted to study abroad. However, when they are in this program, they blamed us to being unwilling or unable to find them a job.” This professor has brought a hidden fact on the table, which may be too harsh for Chinese students to face but totally spot on. Even on the I-20, the section of Optional Practical Training is just “Recommended”.

## Expectations

When asked about expectations towards Chinese students, all of the professors participated in the thesis advocate their international students to be more talkative and participatory both in class and beyond. Not surprised that every professor wants to hear more from Chinese students for no matter what. “It’s a good chance for us to learn different cultures, and if they can be more vocal and communicative, imagine how many things I can learn year by year,” recommended by one professor, supported by another one who said that at this point, professors are more or less autonomously working as a cultural bridge, the role actually they themselves haven’t expected, “We are self-conscious just like Chinese students, I really hope this shared feelings can resonate with them.”

Stopping constantly comparing China with USA was also advocated by professors, “Try to experience things outside of your comfort zone, then you can maximize your study as much as you can, you’ve no idea how far you can go,” said by one professor who then

demonstrated an example of his Chinese student, there was once a Chinese student who did an impressive presentation of business model, “I admire her braveness, and I never see her English holding her back.”

Be aware of this program before applying. Professors showed understanding of students’ frustrations about how unfit they felt in the program. “But you should know what’s going to be taught before you apply, because we post our curriculum online, and it’s very approachable.” In terms of changes and adjustment, professors also insist that some courses have been taught for years and it is required for reasons, the faculty can’t change curriculum constantly just due to complains or frustrations from a number of students. Plus, a professor who is heavily involved into the oversea promotion said that, right now China started to provide arts administration tailor to Chinese students, who may find more suitable if they want to pursue further education in this arena.

Last but not least, American professors were impressed by how eager Chinese students are to work, no wonder hardworking is the first and foremost impression given by professors on Chinese students. However, as one professor said, “Don’t rush to workforce, stay with the program at least for one academic year, try to sharpen your knowledge and English, then go when you are ready.” After all, they come to USA for graduate study, not work. Other professors subtly hinted that Chinese students’ ambition would cause overestimate about their qualifications, then exposing themselves more vulnerable when facing difficulties.

## CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

My research tried to create a mirror effect by presenting two sides of voices in parallel, letting the conversation generate questions and solutions by itself. Every individual has unique approach towards their life, so there is no a one-size-fits-all conclusion that would penetrate to everyone. However, some common issues, along with shared thoughts can more or less reflecting the existing situations, and I suppose by investigations and analysis, we can come up with ideas and recommendations, which hopefully can bring changes to improve.

### Academic Study

If the conflict that Chinese students want more for-profit study while the Arts Administration program in USA is non-profit based can't be solved, at least it can be smoothed by:

1. Introduce more for-profit courses among the campus to provide more choices.
2. Make the enrollment of different courses more flexible, enabling Chinese students to choose courses they are interested in.

Language barrier related to ingrained cultural norms has been grown in most Chinese students' body and mind for more than 20 years, so it's unrealistic to expect that more black sheep like Meili Ni can stand out and make magic happen, how about:

- Advocate the university-wide organizations to put more efforts in engaging Chinese students.

- Include Chinese speakers to faculty and student service offices to assist Chinese students walk through their difficulties gradually.

## **Social Life**

Brought up with the collective culture which distains individuality, the opposite of American culture, not surprised that most of Chinese students experience culture shock at the start of even throughout the program. Even in a flattened world due to the fast development of technology, the 12-hour jet leg, along with rice as staple food, still cultivates Chinese students into a group of human beings with different mentality. But mutual resent and complains play little role in solving the tension. So why don't we:

1. Schedule more program-oriented social events for Chinese students, such as throwing someone a birthday party, sharing their cultural heritage by spending lunar year night with them, and Chinese food potluck etc.
2. Match every Chinese student with an American buddy, who would work as a bridge between the two sides, and volunteers can be selected by submission.
3. Include Chinese students into program's association to represent and speak for the needs of them.

## **Career Development**

Since graduate study is specifically tailor to career path building, it's quite understandable and reasonable that Chinese students not only want to learn from textbook but also hope to explore the real world. Opening up to professors and utilizing faculty

recourses would be the proper choice, but expecting professors to take charge on job matching is not realistic. But we can still work together such as:

1. Turn to professors for help in terms of industry information, job hunting skills, resume writing tutorial, interview practices, etc.
2. Introduce mentorship to Chinese students, at least make sure that they are not dwelling on the wrong path too long until frustration overwhelms them.
3. Initiate more formal career fair for Chinese students to network, which would help them not open more doors.

In a nutshell, each Chinese student comes to USA for this program with different purposes, motivations, and expectations, so their personal stories vary from each other. One man's meat is another man's poison, studying abroad is a lonely journey only taken by your own. External support may help initially, however internal hardcore is the key that opens every difficult door. For the host, if we can see the uniqueness and diversity Chinese international students bring to the country, and utilize them in a profoundly mutual-benefit way, the mission of letting art and leadership influence the world and make it a better place would grounded in humanity, which is the universal language spoken by all.

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